

## **Riverside Study - 1992**

### **PDF Notes**

The study was originally laid out in software no longer used by the Community Development Department. As a result, a number of chart images did not convert properly and the text was repaginated. The table of contents and file names refer to the original page numbering system. In addition, many photographs were deleted to compress file sizes for the web.

If you desire to review the report in its original format, contact Elaine Thorne at 617/349-4648 to request a copy.

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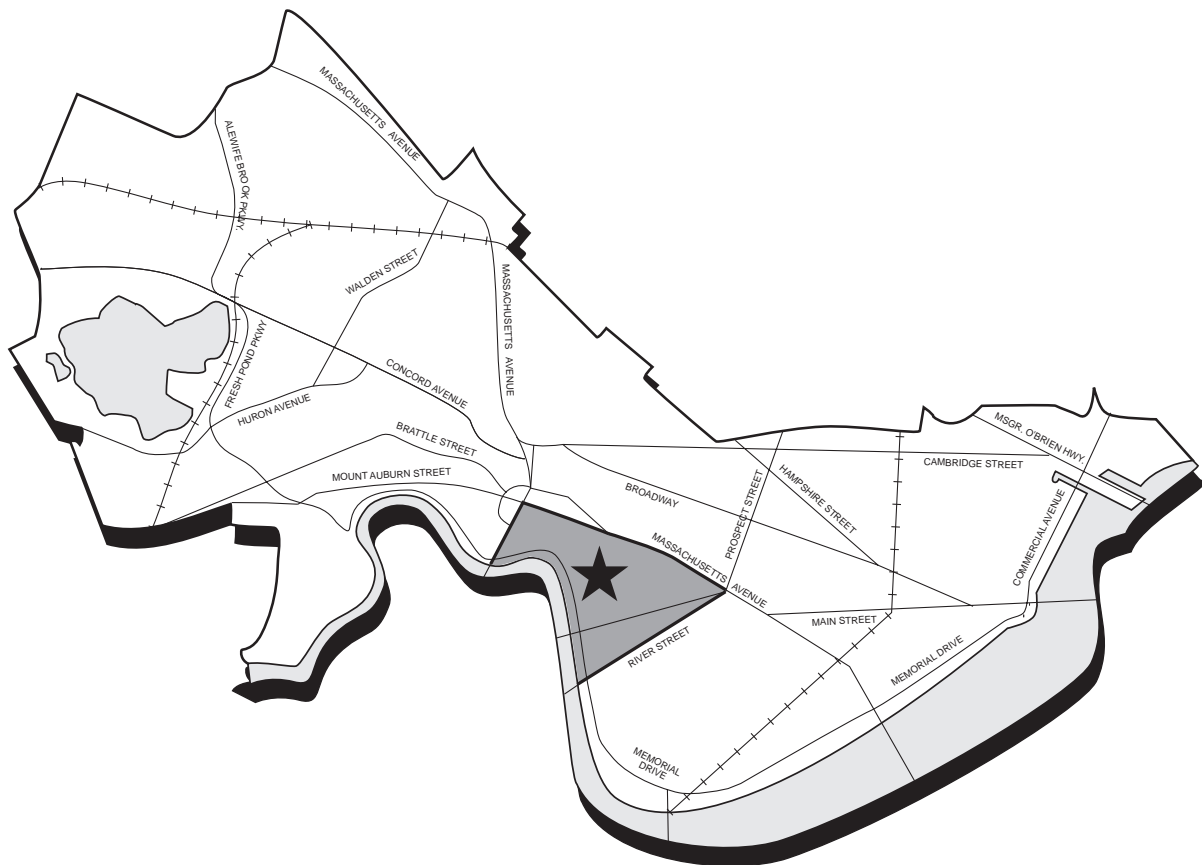
# I N T R O D U C T I O N

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*City of Cambridge*  
*Riverside Neighborhood Location*

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# *Introduction*

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## **The Neighborhood Study Process**

During the 1980s the City of Cambridge, along with the surrounding region, witnessed a wave of economic growth and accelerated real estate development that expanded the city's tax base and created new jobs and opportunities for its residents. While many residents welcomed this return to prosperity, it brought about an increasing awareness of some of the negative effects of growth: increased building density, traffic congestion and parking problems, the rising costs of housing, and inadequate open spaces. Indeed, many in the city perceived the rapid growth as a threat to the fabric of the community and livability of the neighborhoods.

In order to assess the impacts of new development, obtain an updated profile of neighborhood residents and their concerns, and establish an action plan to address these issues, the Community Development Department initiated the neighborhood studies program within its Neighborhood Planning Component. The program centered around a comprehensive study conducted in each of the city's neighborhoods. The City Council endorsed the Department's program in 1988.

As part of each neighborhood study, CDD would collect data on demographic changes over the last three decades, as well as changes in housing markets, land use, and development potential in each neighborhood. For each study, the City Manager would appoint a committee of neighborhood residents, small business owners, and civic leaders, along with staff from the

Community Development Department, to review the data, identify what problems existed in the neighborhood, and make recommendations as to how to resolve these problems. The recommendations would be presented to the City Council, and, where appropriate, would be incorporated into the work programs of City departments for implementation over the next several years.

## **The Riverside Neighborhood Study**

In early 1990, CDD staff sent out fliers and placed advertisements in the local papers seeking Riverside residents to join the upcoming study committee. Later that summer, City Manager Robert Healy named ten of the applicants to the committee. The newly named members came from all the different parts of the neighborhood with the aim of representing the demographic diversity of Riverside. Some had lived there all of their lives, while others had lived there for less than ten years. Among the group were self-employed consultants, a small business owner and members of the Cambridge Community Center board. Harvard University was not included in the original committee; however, after much strong debate, the newly appointed members asked the university to join the study committee and work with them on their task.

The Riverside Study Committee met weekly for ten months from August 1990 to May 1991. During that time, they reviewed, discussed, and debated issues of parks, housing, traffic, economic development, Harvard University, land use and zoning, and urban design. They listened to a

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panel of long time community members, Mr. Benjamin Green, Mrs. Rosa Haynes, and Mrs. Lois Jones, as to their outlook on the community and the changes that have taken place in the neighborhood over the last decades. They took walking tours to see each part of the neighborhood and shared their stories about these places. Through the discussions they identified problems around the neighborhood and pooled their thoughts as to how they might resolve these problems.

At the end of this process, the Committee presented the community with a list of recommendations 15 pages in length. The recommendations ranged from rehabilitating parks with particular concern for the needs of the elderly and female populations; to developing a program to fund maintenance of the rent controlled stock in a way that does not drive up rent levels faster than the earning power of the tenants; to promoting the location of small businesses, minority-owned businesses, and women-owned businesses into the neighborhood by researching the possible creation of a seed capital and small business program.

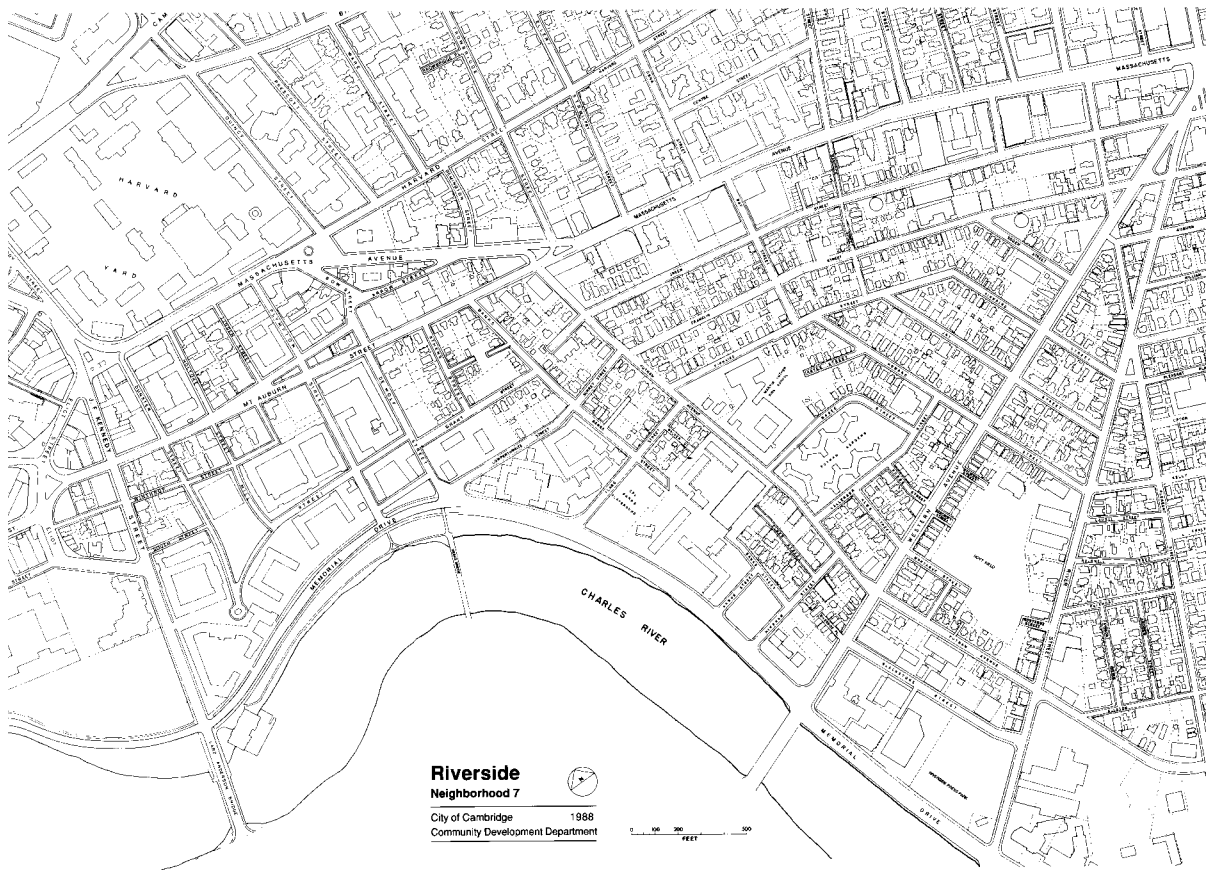
The Committee also made recommendations to help build a positive relationship between the community and Harvard. Among them were encouraging the multi-cultural graduate population at Peabody Terrace to interact with and take

advantage of the many opportunities in Riverside including stores, activities and churches; encouraging stronger direct support of the Riverside neighborhood, especially by having a Harvard representative sit on the board of the Cambridge Community Center; and placing unsightly elements of development, including dumpsters, cooling units, exhaust fans, transformers, large blank walls, loading docks, and spiked fences away from the neighborhood, or screen them sufficiently so that they are not a visual intrusion into the neighborhood.

Most important of all the recommendations was a unified vision of what the Committee wants their neighborhood to be. They want to insure that their neighborhood remains true to its name, Riverside, by strengthening its connection to the riverfront and ensuring that future development will not intrude visually or physically on it. They want future development in the neighborhood to respect the scale, pattern and character of their community through responsible and reasonable design standards and guidelines. They want to make the streets and sidewalks the lifelines that keep the community together through improvements that will invite the whole community to use them. They want to strengthen the community spirit by having people come together in neighborhood parks that serve and are accessible to all. They want to initiate a mutually respectful and constructive relationship with Harvard University. The Committee offers this study and its recommendations to the Riverside community as a means to create a unified vision for the neighborhood and to secure its well-being in the years to come.

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## *Riverside Neighborhood Study Area Map*



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# M E T H O D O L O G Y

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# *Methodology*

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The Riverside Study Committee produced its recommendations through an extended process of issue identification, data collection and analysis, and further review and discussion. Community Development Department staff supported this process by gathering and presenting data from a number of sources, chief among them the U.S. Census, a random telephone survey of Riverside residents, the Cambridge Assessing Department and the Cambridge Zoning Ordinance.

## **1. The US Census: 1970, 1980, and 1990 (partial)**

The Census is a survey of every household taken every ten years by US Commerce Department Census Bureau as mandated by federal law. It collects demographic information on age distribution within the population, household composition, racial makeup, income, length of residency, ancestry and other categories. Because, in theory, it is a survey of every household, the Census provides us with the most complete profile of the city and its residents that is available.

The 1990 Census was not available at the time of the Study Committee process. As a result, the analyses made by the staff and the Committee members used 1970 and 1980 Census figures in conjunction with the results of the Riverside telephone survey. 1990 Census information was added to this text for consistency purposes, as it became available after the Study Committee finished its work. The new Census material does not substantially change the Committee's findings.

Census data is available from the Community Development Department.

## **2. 1990 Random Telephone Survey of Riverside Residents**

In June 1990, a consultant, Atlantic Marketing Research Co., Inc., conducted a random telephone survey of 430 households in Riverside to determine the demographic character of the neighborhood as well as residents' perceptions and attitudes on issues of community concern. The survey is one of a series of telephone surveys conducted by the Department in several neighborhoods in conjunction with the neighborhood study process. The Department will conduct surveys as a part of future neighborhood studies.

The survey instrument is composed of 66 questions designed by the Community Development Department with the consultant. It is a combination of open-ended questions (those to which the respondent can give any response desired,) and closed questions with a specified range of answers. The instrument asked four broad category of questions: general demographics, housing, employment, and attitudinal.

The survey was done, in part, to elicit demographic information, similar to that of the Census, but which was not yet available, or was not part of the federal questionnaire. Typically, it takes the Census Bureau two to three years to process neighborhood level data and make them available to municipalities. The intention of the telephone survey was to provide Study Committee members with as current a profile of the neighborhood as possible to inform their discussions. In addition, the Committee was able to pull out much more refined conclusions than the Census data through

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cross tabulations. This means, the Committee could compile a profile of a particular group in the neighborhood. For example, the Committee could analyze the neighborhood's elderly population in terms of race, income, housing, and more.

The Census and the telephone survey are not directly comparable, as the Census is a house-by-house survey and the telephone survey is a sample of households. While one cannot compare numbers directly, general trends can be determined and general conclusions can be made.

In addition, another very important reason for the telephone survey was to gather attitudinal information from residents. This included feelings towards development and its positive or negative effects; the need for more housing, especially affordable housing, and whether that should be rental or owner housing; whether, how often and for what reasons residents use neighboring commercial squares or districts; attitudes about the condition and availability of parks and open space; and other questions on other areas of concern in the neighborhood. As with the demographic data, the Committee could also use cross tabulations of the attitudinal data to get a more refined picture of who in the neighborhood thought what. For example, what are the elderly's attitudes towards the conditions and availability of open space.

As with the Census information, the telephone survey results are available from the Community Development Department.

### ***3. Cambridge Assessor's Data***

The Study Committee used data from the Assessor's Office to analyze the nature and quality of the neighborhood's housing stock, to illustrate the market for renting or buying a house in Riverside, and to examine the remaining build-out potential in the neighborhood. Housing data included the number of buildings in each property class (one, two, three-family, etc.,) the number of dwelling units, the number of rent controlled units, and the number of housing sales in each property class and their sales prices. These data form the basis for analyzing housing availability and affordability in the neighborhood. Property data, such as building and lot size, was gathered for all commercially zoned areas (except for Central and Harvard Squares as they have separate planning processes) and higher density residential zoning districts. These data were used in calculating the amount of additional building allowed in the neighborhood under current zoning. All data is from 1990.

### ***4. The Cambridge Zoning Ordinance***

The Zoning Ordinance, in conjunction with the Assessor's data, forms the basis for determining the remaining build-out potential in Riverside. The Zoning Ordinance is the part of the municipal code which governs how land and buildings in the city may be used. For each zoning district, the ordinance lays out three types of general regulations: 1) use: what activities or mix of activities may or may not take place; 2) dimensional requirements: what floor-area-ratio, density, height or set back restrictions apply to any one building in any given zoning district; and 3) parking requirements: how many spaces, if any, must be included with a building.

N E I G H B O R H O O D  
P R O F I L E

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# *Neighborhood Profile*

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Riverside is a neighborhood of many identities. At its heart lies the residential neighborhood, characterized by two-, three- and four-story wood-frame houses. Surrounding this are the institutional buildings of Harvard University on its west, the commercial centers of Harvard and Central Squares along its northern edge, a mix of Harvard housing, office buildings and parks along the Charles River at its southern periphery, and the Cambridgeport neighborhood to the east. Within this world are residents who have lived there all of their lives, “newcomers” who have only lived there for 25 years, and real newcomers who have been there for less than ten years. There are people of West Indian, Cape Verdean, Irish, African, Italian, and Greek extraction, along with newly arrived Haitians, Hispanics and Asians.

This chapter explores the origins of the neighborhood of today and the physical and social changes that have occurred since the European settlement in the 17th century. In addition, it looks at some of the demographic trends of the past three decades.

## **From Salt Marsh to Neighborhood: Riverside from the 17th to the 20th century**

Upon their arrival in 1630, the English settlers found what is now called Riverside to be mostly salt marsh. They settled in the location of Harvard Square, calling their village Newtowne. What is today Massachusetts Avenue was a narrow road that led to the oyster banks near Lafayette Square; a path, today Putnam Avenue, followed a moraine, or ridge, to its end near Western Avenue.

The moraine divided the marsh in two: a smaller marsh in the area of what is now Banks Street; and a larger marsh extending from Putnam Avenue to Western Avenue up to Green Street. For much of the 18th century, the only growth that took place in the area that is now Riverside took place around Harvard Square. Most of Riverside, however, remained a wet marsh, owned by only a handful of people, and occupied by even fewer than that.

The 19th century brought changes to the salt marsh, but not nearly as dramatically as in other rapidly growing neighborhoods in Cambridge. Two new roads were built: River Street, originally called Brighton Street, was built in 1811, while Western Avenue, or Watertown Road as it was known, was laid out in 1824. These roads, radiating out from Central Square, were part of a flurry of road building in the early 19th century to connect Cambridge and the outlying towns with the West Boston Bridge (now the Longfellow Bridge,) which was built in 1793. Prior to the construction of the West Boston Bridge, all traffic west of Cambridge enroute to Boston was forced to cross the Charles where it narrowed at Harvard Square, travel through Brighton to Roxbury, and reach Boston via Roxbury Neck (now Washington Street in Boston,) or take the ferry at Charlestown. The construction of the West Boston Bridge and the new roads brought on the settlement at Central Square and more growth of Harvard Square. However, despite the increased traffic through the area, Riverside proper was left largely unsettled.

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The marshes of Riverside remained quiet until 1851, when Charles Little and James Brown set up a book bindery at the bottom of River Street on the river front. The next year, Little and Brown leased the bindery to Henry O. Houghton who promptly set up the Riverside Press; subsequently, Little, Brown and Company opened a new bindery across Blackstone Street from the Houghton operations. Unlike the heavy industries booming in other parts of the city, presses did not need rail service to transport raw materials in and ship products out. Rather, it needed a large site which could support substantial floor space, something sparsely settled Riverside could provide; fuel and paper were brought by schooner to the company's dock on the Charles.

The success and subsequent expansion of the binderies and presses and the growth of Harvard and Central Squares brought new people into the area. The long process of draining and filling the marsh began in the 1840s at Green Street. The old marsh to the east of Putnam Avenue was a significant obstacle to development; nonetheless, by the 1870s, most of the land in the core of the neighborhood had been filled and subdivided into house lots, although only about one-half had been developed. The last area filled was what is now Hoyt Field, which was occupied by a mill pond that was used to provide water power to a succession of rope walks and grist mills near the river. The pond was finally taken and filled by the city in 1880.

During the last quarter of the 19th century, the physical growth of the residential neighborhood followed the expansion of the presses. By 1890, Houghton's Riverside Press employed 600 people. Most of the residents were of European descent, with the Irish predominating; however, starting in the 1890s a large number of Blacks began to settle in the newly built area around Howard Street. Many of these families came from the American South, but the first decade of the 20th century brought a large number of people from Nova Scotia and the West Indies. A 1903 study of working class neighborhoods in the metropolitan area describes the West Indians as skilled workmen, namely printers, cabinet

makers, wood workers and carpenters. The men arrived first, earning their passage by working on boats sailing from the West Indies to Canada, then making their way south to the United States. Others came directly from the islands. Once settled, they brought their wives and families here to live. Only one other place in Cambridge had as many Blacks living together in a cohesive community; this was located on Burleigh Street, now the site of Washington Elms, Newtowne Court and Tech Square in Neighborhood 4.

The filling of the shoreline that allowed residents to move into Riverside also made room for other industries including coal yards, planing (lumber finishing) mills, laundries, the Cambridge Electric Light Works, and the stable for the Cambridge Electric Railway. Most of these were concentrated between John F. Kennedy Street and Banks Street where the Harvard Houses sit today. The Riverside Press (Houghton Mifflin) continued to expand along the river front, while Little, Brown and Company grew to the east of Putnam Avenue. At the turn of the century, another landmark, the Reversible Collar Company, settled in Riverside locating its factory on the site of Peabody Terrace.

Entering the 20th century, Riverside resembled many of the other neighborhoods in Cambridge with industry and housing side by side. Harvard University, at that time, focused much of its development energies on Harvard Yard and the North Yard, almost ignoring the river front. However, with the ascension of A. Lawrence Lowell to the college presidency in 1909, Harvard expanded its view of the university to include the land south of the Yard and Square, primarily as a site to house undergraduates. As a result, from 1902 to 1912 Harvard, in association with wealthy alumni, bought up parcels of land with the intent of building a series of new dormitories modeled after the English house system. This ambitious plan took until 1931 to complete, resulting in a large complex of buildings organized into seven "houses" containing dormitory rooms, libraries, dining halls and other amenities which the university thought would incline their students to work their best.

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Harvard was not the only entity looking at the Charles River waterfront with an eye for redevelopment. Real estate speculators and municipal governments alike envisioned the river banks as parkland. The idea of improving the river's edge dated from the early 1880s, and the talk of building a dam across the Charles to stabilize its large tides had been discussed since 1850. During the last two decades of the 19th century there was an increasing awareness by the municipalities on both sides of the Charles that something had to be done with the mud flats along the river banks, from both a public health and aesthetic view point. In 1894, the City of Cambridge purchased the entire riverfront from Msgr. O'Brien Highway to Gerry's Landing and hired the landscape architect Charles Eliot to plan a riverfront park. Construction started west of present-day John F. Kennedy Street in 1896, but the section between Kennedy Street and Western Avenue was not completed until 1908. The stretch between Western Avenue and River Street, which required the removal of some buildings of the Riverside Press, delayed the opening of the parkway until 1914.

In the meantime, starting in 1903, the state began construction of a dam across the Charles (at the site of the Science Museum today) to control tides and convert the river basin from brackish water to fresh. The tides were excluded from the Charles River basin in 1909, and the dam finished in 1910. Thus, between the City's plan to beautify the river front and Harvard's intention to house its undergraduate population, the banks of the Charles in Riverside were transformed from place of gritty utility to one of scenic charm. This charm was a striking counterpoint to the ever increasing complex of the Riverside Press and the evolving operations of Little, Brown's bindery.

During the 1930s and 40s, Riverside did not change very much in its outward appearance. However, the 1950s brought the beginnings of massive changes in government, industry and higher education that would have profound physical and social effects on this small place, as it would on other neighborhoods in the city over the next 40 years.

First was the federal government's establishment of a policy to build housing for low-income families, along with the rise of new social theories that wood-frame residential cities of the 19th century were places of blight leading to host of social ills. These theories manifested themselves with the construction of Putnam Gardens in 1953. Putnam Gardens contains many of the elements thought to be beneficial for the new city: brick construction and garden apartment-like groupings that removed the existing 19th century street pattern.

Second was the beginning of the decline of manufacturing in Cambridge as well as the entire northeast. Riverside did not have the same kind of heavy industry as Cambridgeport, East Cambridge or Alewife, and did not feel the same gradual draining away of jobs during the 1960s, but de-industrialization did touch Riverside with the closing of Reversible Collar first in 1930, Little, Brown in 1964 and finally Riverside Press in 1971.

Coupled with the decline of industry was the emergence of higher education, in this case Harvard University, as a significant factor in the city's economy and with enormous effects on the Riverside neighborhood. Harvard, along with other academic institutions, expanded its programs and enrollment during the 1960s leading the university to create new housing for its growing student body and new centers for its administrative offices. Between 1960 and 1965 Harvard built Holyoke Center; in 1963 it erected 22 story Peabody Terrace for married students; and in 1967 Mather house was constructed for undergraduate dormitories. The tall towers of these buildings stand in stark contrast to the modest wood-frame houses of the residential neighborhood and with the elegant Georgian Harvard Houses from the early decades of the 20th century.

Today, Riverside is a reflection of three centuries of changes, from the original English settlement at Harvard Square, to the houses of the mid and late 19th century and early 20th century, to the institutional expansion of Harvard University in the early and mid 20th century, and to the

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demolition of the factories in the 1960s and 70s. It is also the reflection of all the different people from different continents who have come here over the past three hundred years to give us the rich mixture of residents we have today.

### **Riverside Today: A Demographic Profile**

The total population of the Riverside neighborhood has not changed much from 1970. At that time, there were 9,747 people living in the neighborhood. The results of the 1990 Census show 10,432 residents, a seven percent increase since 1970. This growth has been due to an increase in the number of residents in Harvard housing, which showed a 30 percent increase during this same time period. Moreover, the population in households decreased by three percent. Nearly all of this loss occurred in the 1970s. While Riverside's population growth may be modest, it is in contrast with the overall decline in the city's population. Between 1970 and 1990, the city lost nearly five percent of its residents. Most of this loss occurred between 1970 and 1980. Both Riverside's population and that of the city have remained stable since 1980, with very little change occurring in either.

### ***Age Distribution***

Despite only minor overall change in the size of the neighborhood's population, there have been tremendous changes within it. The median age remains 20 to 24, due to the large number of students in the neighborhood. (The US Census counts students living in dormitories as residents of the area in which their dormitory is located.) This group occupied the median in the 1970 and 1980 census as well. However, there was an 11 percent decrease in the number of children in the 0 to 19 age group between 1970 and 1980. More dramatically, there was a 36 percent decrease in the 0 to 4 age group in that interval, and, at the same time, a 32 percent increase in the 20 to 34 age group, a population which included both graduate students and nonstudents. These changes have altered the population of Riverside profoundly. As drawn from the 1990 telephone survey, over half of the population was under 34

years of age, with the major proportion being between 20 and 34. One-fifth of the neighborhood's population is between 35 and 44 years of age; 13 percent are 45 to 64, and one-tenth are 65 and older.

Looking at age distribution by race, Black residents make up more of the older population in the neighborhood. The 1990 telephone survey found that almost one-quarter of Blacks are 55 or older, compared to one-tenth of the White residents. Most Whites are between the ages of 20 and 34, as are Asians.

### ***Race***

The number and percentage of White residents has been decreasing since 1970. At that time, over three-quarters of the population was White, whereas now Whites comprise two-thirds of the population. The Black population has fluctuated only slightly, increasing from 12 to 19 percent between 1970 and 1980, and then decreasing from 19 percent in 1980 to 17 percent in 1990.

The most substantial growth has been among Asians. The 1970 Census did not make any racial distinctions other than Black or White; however, in 1980, Asians made up five percent of the neighborhood's population. As of 1990, this proportion rose to 12 percent, double the number of Asians in the neighborhood from a decade ago. However, according to the 1990 telephone survey, nearly all Asians are students, and while they are a growing proportion of the neighborhood's residents, their residency does not necessarily indicate a stable Asian population settling in Riverside.

### ***Household Composition***

In keeping with the young median age of the neighborhood, over one-quarter (29%) of the telephone survey respondents live alone, and the same percentage live with one or more roommates. Nearly one-quarter (22%) describe their households as couples with children. Although a direct comparison cannot be made between the Census data and the telephone survey results, the telephone survey seems to

support a trend of decline in the percentage of two parent families in Riverside. Between 1970 and 1980, the percentage of this household type decreased by 26 percent. The city also experienced a decrease (15%) in two parent families with children during the same period.

In the telephone survey, Black and Asian respondents are more likely than White respondents to be living in households with children. White respondents are more likely to describe their households as couples without children. Out of all respondents, over one quarter live alone; the same percentage lives with one or more roommates. Of those in roommate living situations, over half of them are Asian, compared to over one-quarter of the White and 12 percent of the Black respondents. Thus it appears that Asians tend to live in either households with roommates or as couples with children.

#### **Children in School**

In keeping with their profile of being older and living in households with children, 24 percent of Black residents have children enrolled in school. This is nearly double for the 13 percent of all households in the neighborhood having children enrolled in school.

#### **Length of Residency**

The 1990 telephone survey found that over half (57%) of all residents living in the neighborhood have lived there for less than five years. The newness of the population to the neighborhood is probably due in large part to the number of students living in Riverside, both in student housing and in private quarters. Virtually all Asians, nine out of ten, have lived there for less than five years, corresponding to their younger age and student status. Over half the White respondents said they had lived there for less than five years, whereas the survey found that only 27 percent of the Blacks living in Riverside have lived there for less than five years.

#### **Income**

According to the federal Census, median income for Riverside and the city has risen steadily since 1970, although the median for the neighborhood has always been below that of the city. Between 1980 and 1990, the city-wide median has risen 133 percent (30% in 1989 dollars;) Riverside has risen by nearly the same percentage:

#### **Riverside Median Family Income**

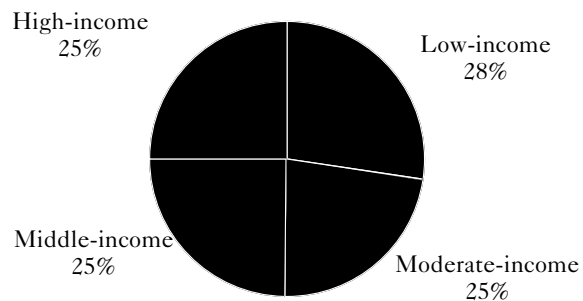
|                  | 1970    | 1980     | 1990     |
|------------------|---------|----------|----------|
| <b>Riverside</b> | \$7,985 | \$13,914 | \$32,746 |
| <b>Cambridge</b> | \$9,815 | \$17,845 | \$39,990 |

#### **Riverside as a percentage of the city:**

|     |     |     |
|-----|-----|-----|
| 81% | 78% | 82% |
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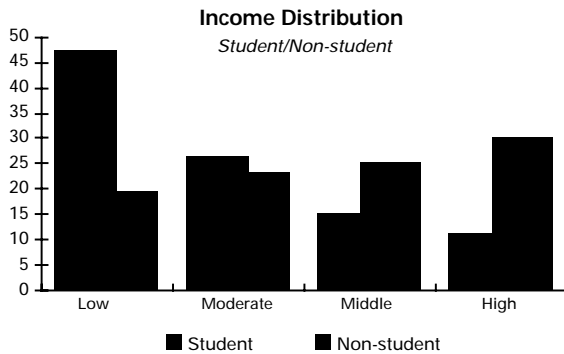
In 1980, Riverside ranked tenth in terms of median family income for all the city's 13 neighborhoods. Only Neighborhood 2 (MIT campus) and Neighborhood 4 ranked lower. Riverside's relative position improved in the 1990 Census, where it ranked ninth.

The median, while indicating the general economic well-being of the community, does not show income distribution in the neighborhood. From the telephone survey, it appears that the respondents are divided almost equally into low-, moderate-, middle- and high- income categories.

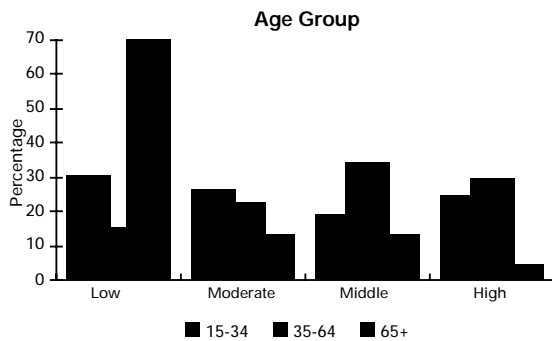


*\* Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding.*

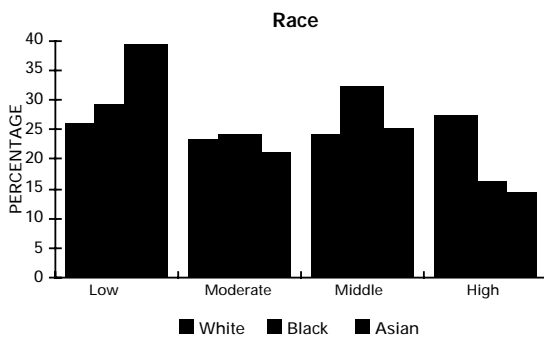
However, when the responses from students are separated, income distribution within the neighborhood changes considerably:



Age is also a considerable factor in income distribution, with over two-thirds (70%) of respondents over age 65 falling into the low income category.



With regards to race, White respondents nearly matched the overall neighborhood distribution. However, Blacks were more likely than Whites to have middle incomes, but far less likely than Whites to have high incomes. Asians, consistent with their student status, were more likely to have low incomes than either Whites or Blacks.



### Income Definitions

- **Low income** is equal to or less than 50 percent of the Boston area median income.
- **Moderate income** is 51-80 percent of the Boston area median income.
- **Middle Income** is 81-120 percent of the Boston area median income.
- **High income** is more than 120 percent of the Boston area median income.

The 1989 Boston area median income for a family of four was \$46,300 per year.

### Conclusion

Possibly the most significant changes over the past several decades have been the dramatic decrease in the number of children under 18 and the shift in household composition to a greater number of couples without children, single occupants and roommates. The other striking change has been the rise in median family income from 1980 to 1990, although it still ranks below the city-wide median. Despite the apparent prosperity of the neighborhood, certain segments of the population remain of low- and moderate-income means, most notably those residents under 35 and over 65 years.